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Source: The economist published an article regarding the ex-premier of Pakistan Imran Khan, his wife Bushara Bibi, and Spy (Army) on Nov 14th, 2025.

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS: MICHELLE THOMPSON
SOURCE IMAGES: Khawar Manika, Getty Images, AFP, Reuters, Shutterstock

This Booklet is created by Mustafa Kamal Shah, a student with apolitical mindset but avid reader and a common person of the society. This piece is created because most people wanted to read this but do not have access to the expensive subscription of the economist. Further he added the details of important keywords and their meaning and definition at the end to facilitate easier read.

Title: The mystic, the cricketer and the spy: Pakistan's game of thrones

Imran Khan's marriage to his spiritual adviser shocked the country. Now she could help decide whether he returns to office or stays in prison

By Owen Bennett-Jones and Bushra Taskeen

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1843 LONG READS

The mystic, the cricketer and the spy: Pakistan's game of thrones

Imran Khan's marriage to his spiritual adviser shocked the country. Now she could help decide whether he returns to office or stays in prison

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By Owen Bennett-Jones and Bushra Taskeen

In the mid 2010s Imran Khan was at a low ebb. He had been a household name in Pakistan ever since he led the country's cricket team to victory in the 1992 World Cup. But as he entered his 60s, the fame, glamour and parties which followed left him feeling unfulfilled. Khan wanted to make his mark in politics.

He'd had opportunities. Hoping to exploit his celebrity, the main political parties courted him in the early 1990s but, considering them corrupt, he spurned them. Instead he founded his own party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, or PTI), pledging to clean up politics. Historically, Pakistan has been dominated by two political parties, each tied to a powerful family. Running for his own party meant years in the wilderness, struggling to be taken seriously. When Khan sat down with journalists to discuss the condition of Pakistan they only wanted to talk about cricket, or his latest girlfriend.

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For a moment it had looked like Khan was starting to get somewhere. In 2014 he led protests against Nawaz Sharif, the recently elected prime minister, whom Khan accused of having won the premiership through a rigged vote. The fact that these demonstrations were allowed to take place in the centre of Islamabad caused some to speculate that the army, the de-facto power behind Pakistan's superficially democratic politics, was interested in a change of government. But things fizzled out.

Khan tried again in 2016 after a cache of leaked documents known as the Panama Papers seemed to implicate Sharif's children in corruption (they were later charged and eventually acquitted). The former cricketer corralled protesters in Peshawar, but a promised march on the capital never happened. Pakistan's political gossips wondered if Khan's moment had passed.

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"Her interference", one member of Khan's cabinet told 1843, "was absolute"

Home life offered no consolation. He had separated from his second wife, Reham Khan, a former BBC weather presenter, after their relations deteriorated to the point where they could barely be in the same room (he later described the relationship as his biggest mistake). Then Khan came into contact with someone who would profoundly change his life, offering him both spiritual guidance and the promise of worldly success.

Bushra Manika, as she was then known, was a middle-aged married woman from Punjab with a strong interest in Sufism, a mystical strain of Islam which emphasises spiritual contemplation. It is not unusual for Pakistani Sufis to seek advice from a lay person they believe has access to higher wisdom (although it is less common for that person to be a woman). Bushra—who is generally referred to in the Pakistani press by the honorific "Bushra Bibi"—had begun to offer such counsel to her friends and family.

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Khan was introduced to Bushra Bibi by her older sister, Maryam. Like many middle-class Pakistanis, Maryam shared Khan's political vision—nationalist, Islamist and anti-Western—and she volunteered for the PTI from her home in the United Arab Emirates. At some point in her conversations with Khan, who was prone to fretting about religion and the meaning of life, Maryam suggested he talk to her sister.

Bushra Bibi would have been well aware of Khan. During the period she grew up, children all over the country had posters of him on their bedroom walls. Boys fantasised about emulating his sporting prowess; girls dreamt of marrying him. Bushra Bibi was reluctant to talk to Khan at first, saying she did not meet men outside of the family, but eventually agreed to a telephone consultation. And that was when it began. The calls went on for hours through the night.

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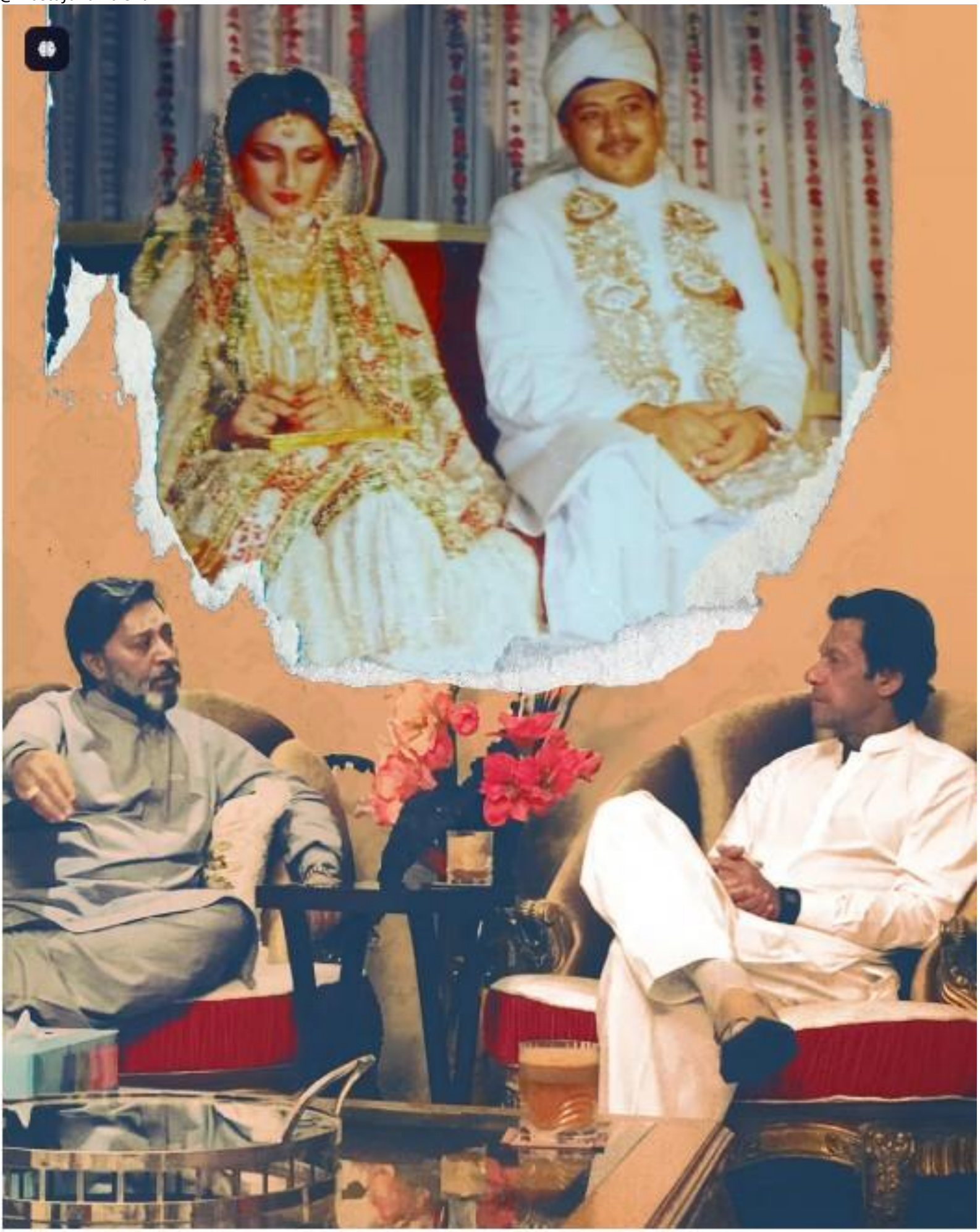

Bushra Bibi with her first husband, Khawar Manika (*top*), whom she married in 1989. Initially Manika welcomed Khan into their family home (*bottom*)

Eventually the calls became visits. Bushra Bibi's husband, Khawar Manika, was pleased at first. He liked having such a famous person at his home. But as his wife's intimacy with Khan grew he became concerned. "She wanted to sit alone and talk to him. I would say, as a husband, 'Why can't we sit together?'" he told *1843*. Sometimes Manika would walk in on them but, "every time I stepped in, there was a hush."

According to Manika, his wife explained to Khan that she had seen the future: if the two of them were married, his election as prime minister would follow (Bushra Bibi has denied this story). At the end of 2017 she divorced her husband, and on January 1st 2018 she married Khan in a secret ceremony. Khan claims not even to have seen his bride's face before they were married; looks no longer mattered to the former playboy. "Sufism is an order with many levels," he said to a British newspaper, "but I have never met anyone who is as high as my wife."

If she did make a prediction to Khan about his political future, his confidence in her powers must have soared when the PTI won the general election a few months after their marriage. At last, Khan was prime minister. His victory was partly the result of the army's backing. But there was more to it than that. His anti-corruption message, and image as a political outsider, chimed with the public mood.

Holding on to power in Pakistan is harder than winning it, however. The political system is volatile, raising leaders up and casting them down again mercilessly. Five prime ministers have found themselves in jail after leaving office. The army, which is well-resourced, has repeatedly seized power. Even when civilians are running the government, they have to be mindful of what the generals want. (Only one civilian government in Pakistan's history has been allowed to complete its term.)

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Pakistani politics has the quality of a Netflix series. There are coups, assassinations...and, every now and then, threats of nuclear war

Once in office Khan struggled to fulfil lofty campaign promises of creating an Islamic welfare state and 10m jobs. His relations with the political and military elite quickly soured. His wife upset crucial friends and allies. Ministers and household staff grumbled about the eccentric First Lady being given too much power. "Her interference", one member of his cabinet told *1843*, "was absolute."

In 2022 Pakistan's parliamentarians passed a no-confidence vote in his government (an action widely assumed to have been abetted by the army), and Khan was forced out. Rather than go quietly, he went public with criticism of the army and launched street protests. As generally happens to those the generals have removed from power, he found himself in jail facing corruption charges. (The army's media office declined to make anyone available for comment on this story.)

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Since being imprisoned, Khan has become extraordinarily popular. His crusade against Pakistan's venal elites has won him so many supporters that the army has imposed an unwritten but widely observed ban on his name being mentioned on TV. It hasn't dampened interest: "the founding chairman of the PTI", as he is now referred to, remains a frequent topic of conversation on all news programmes.

Khan now faces a dilemma: stick to his principles and stay behind bars or say something obliging about the armed forces and be released, with a chance of his party returning to government in due course.

Bushra Bibi is also in prison (she too faces corruption charges), and some in the PTI are hoping she will persuade Khan to compromise and get the party back into power. How a housewife from the backwaters of Punjab came to play such a prominent role on the national stage is a topic of endless speculation in Pakistan —one often coloured by misogyny, misinformation and conspiracy theories.

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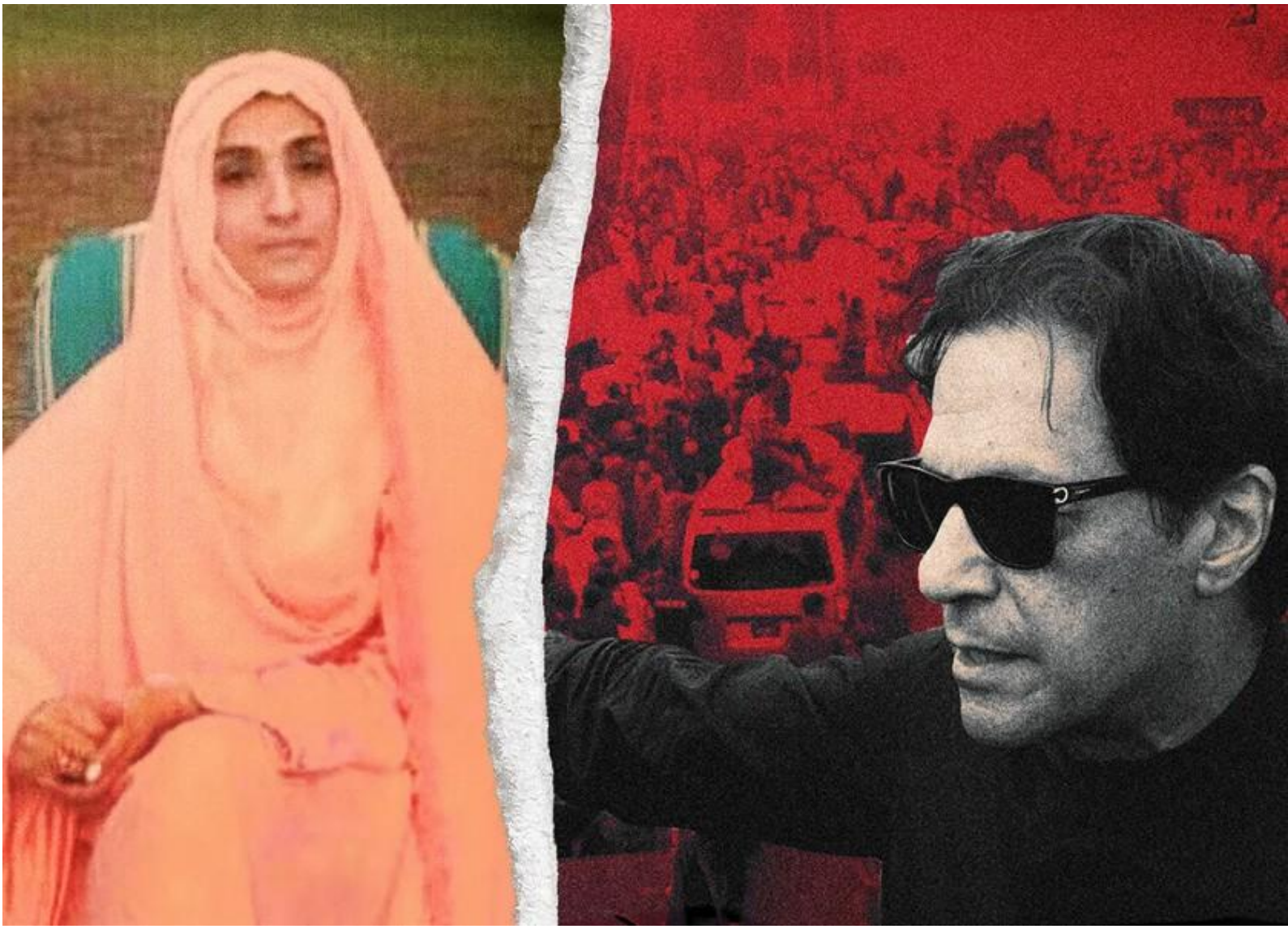

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Friends of Khan say his naivety allowed Bushra Bibi to become so powerful. Others point to the treacherous undercurrents and hidden agendas that shape Pakistani politics. Both have a point. Interviews with more than a dozen close associates of the Khans, as well as prominent figures in the military establishment, make one thing clear: the story of Bushra Bibi, like so much in Pakistan, is more complex than it seems.

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Bushra Riaz Watoo, as she was known as a child, was not always pious. She was brought up in rural Punjab where, according to a member of the Watoo clan whose vocabulary retains echoes of the colonial era, her grandfather was a "redoubtable" landowner. Her father however sold his land and opened a Chinese restaurant. At some point Bushra Bibi and her sister Maryam were sent to Lahore to live with elderly relatives. According to Maryam, they both attended Queen Mary College, a respectable school for middle-class girls (although puzzlingly the school says it has no record of them ever having been there).

Then as now, Lahore had a vibrant and snobbish social scene. The landed upper classes would frequently attend soirees in each others' tastefully decorated homes. Bushra Bibi's family was one rung down from this elite. According to people who knew her as a teenager, she attended slightly more louche parties (Maryam strongly denies any suggestion that her sister ran wild in her youth). Bushra Bibi refused to wear the *dupatta*, the long scarf which Pakistani women traditionally drape around themselves, when visiting relatives in the countryside. "She was ultra-modern," said a former rural neighbour, not entirely approvingly.

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"This is not nice, you know, talking about Bushra and Imran's marriage," Hussain recalled the general saying. "She's a good match"

When she turned 18 Bushra Bibi's life took a more conventional turn with her marriage to Manika, the son of a well-known Punjabi politician. According to one acerbic observer of Lahore society, the match was quite a coup for her: "The Manikas are large landowners: she came from the lower orders." Marriage brought material comforts and prestige, but also considerable constraints. As a wife in a wealthy household, she was expected to busy herself producing children (she had five), meeting relatives and managing the staff in the family homes in Lahore, Islamabad and Pakpattan, the Manikas' ancestral home town.

According to Maryam, Bushra Bibi's marriage was not a happy one. She seems to have found an escape in the philosophy of Sufi Islam. As the years passed and her children became more independent, she spent more and more time at the shrine of one of Pakistan's most famous saints.

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Born in the 12th century, Baba Farid was a Sufi poet and mystic whose teachings on tolerance and humanity inspired Hindus and Sikhs as well as Muslims. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit his grave in Pakpattan every year and call on the saint to help with problems such as difficult marriages, bad luck at work and infertility.

There are many different kinds of Muslims in Pakistan, ranging from Sufi spiritualists who seek the divine in music and ritual, to Taliban-supporting fundamentalists who, among other things, blow up Sufi shrines. But Sufism has the largest number of adherents, and much of public life in Pakistan is informed by the Sufi tradition.

Sufism places great emphasis on the individual's connection with the divine, and a class of people known as *pirs*—of whom Baba Farid was a prime example—emerged to help followers encounter God. In time, the descendants of major *pirs* became *pirs* in their own right, and custodians of their shrines. People can also become *pirs* by developing a reputation for wisdom and learning.

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Some *pirs* focus on study and meditation; others build large followings. Some have little interest in religion, becoming wealthy landlords living off the income generated by the shrines they inherit. A few have so many devotees ready to vote for them they can be sure of a seat in the National Assembly should they decide to stand.

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People often seek out *pirs* as a source of guidance on the future. Followers don't necessarily take their *pirs*' predictions as gospel. But many believe it's worth hearing what they have to say, as there's at least a chance they could be right.

By her late 20s Bushra Bibi was on her way to becoming a *pir*, albeit a minor one, advising a close circle of friends and family. Her interest in faith was genuine: she prayed through the night and read books about the mystical aspects of Islam. Manika made some efforts to support her interest, even walking barefoot with her from Lahore to Pakpattan in a display of religious devotion. It took the best part of a week. But his heart wasn't really in it. He freely admits that he had a different approach to life: "I was a partying kind of guy," he said.

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Bushra Bibi, meanwhile, "became more and more religious," said her sister, Maryam. "Increasingly, people turned to her for advice." Khan, frustrated with his life, became one of them.

Pakistani politics has the quality of a Netflix series. There are coups, assassinations, jihadist attacks, street-stopping protests, tribal insurgencies and, every now and then, threats of nuclear war. When word trickled out that Khan had a new female *pir* in Pakpattan, the plot twist hooked the nation.

Khan has been linked to a string of glamorous women over the years. Inevitably the gossips speculated that this was another of his affairs. He went on television to insist the relationship between him and Bushra Bibi was entirely spiritual.

Yet Khan's interest had clearly been piqued by the mysterious, veiled woman telling him to clean up his life. In the same interview he said that he had asked her to become his wife. (In fact the pair were already married at this point, which the PTI confirmed the following month.)

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During his first term in office Asif Zardari had a live-in pir who met foreign dignitaries when they visited, and would sacrifice a goat on his behalf every day

Friends were concerned. "He says she is the best thing that has ever happened to him," said Masood Chishti, who has known Khan since childhood and remains close to him. "He's so naive, and he's a very bad judge of character." Salman Ahmad, a Sufi musician and another old friend of Khan's, said, "He cannot see beyond that Sufi halo that she carries around with her. That's a big blind spot for him."

From the moment she arrived at Khan's home, Bushra Bibi seems to have ruffled feathers. Khan's driver, Mohammed Safeer, was among those perturbed by her arrival. Having worked for Khan for decades, he had become wary of his boss's romantic decisions. He claims to have clocked right away that Khan's tempestuous second marriage to Reham was a blunder, and told him so. But this new wife, with her insistence on superstitious practices, looked even less promising. "I told him, this time he has made a super-blunder. That was the phrase I used," Safeer recalled. Khan took it as a joke and laughed. (Safeer has since left the Khan household.)

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The family of Bushra's first husband, Khawar Manika, also issued warnings about her. One relative went so far as to approach Jahangir Tareen, a sugar baron and political ally of Khan's, whose savvy and resources helped the PTI construct a winning slate of candidates for the 2018 election.

The relative said to Tareen that Bushra Bibi was dabbling in black magic. "I told him she was doing all these activities and practices to acquire some holy powers so that she can cast spells on people," he later told *1843*.

In Pakistan, practices that some might call black magic are not unusual. Folk superstitions have endured in the same way that saluting a magpie has in Britain. Even educated, middle-class Pakistanis might, for example, leave meat for the birds on the roof, believing that doing so might dispel bad spirits. During his first term in office between 2008 and 2013, the current president, Asif Zardari, had a live-in *pir* who met foreign dignitaries when they visited, and would sacrifice a goat on his behalf every day.

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There were a few articles in the Pakistani press about Zardari's goat habit. But Bushra Bibi's alleged activities generated hundreds of lurid headlines and YouTube videos, no doubt in part because she was a woman. Officials from Khan's political party, the PTI, insist stories of her spell-casting are unsubstantiated gossip spread by disgruntled ex-employees. "These are people who have been disgraced and belong to the other political camp. They have no credibility at all," said Raoof Hassan, a PTI spokesman. (*1843* approached Khan's lawyer about this story but he didn't respond to questions.)

It is true that many of the details of Bushra Bibi's occult-sounding activities come from members of the Khan household who lost their positions after she arrived. But the picture they paint is detailed. Safeer, Khan's driver, said that soon after she moved into Khan's house he was told to buy 1.25kg of beef, which was passed around her husband's head three times while she chanted incantations. The flesh, according to Safeer, was then thrown on the roof to be eaten by the birds. Next red chillies were circled around the former cricketer's head. (They were set alight so as to ward off bad spirits that had been left by his second wife.)

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The driver said he was also instructed to procure the severed heads of black goats each day, except on Tuesdays and Wednesdays when he had to buy dead black chickens instead. He delivered these items to Bushra's maids at 10 or 11 in the morning; in the afternoon the remnants would be returned with an instruction to leave them in a graveyard. Azim Rana, a butcher near Khan's home, also recalled getting odd orders from the household—each morning he would be asked for beef, black animal heads and, from time to time, live black goats which he claimed he would personally deliver and dispatch with a special knife provided by Bushra Bibi.

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Civilian politicians cannot remain in office if the army wants them gone

A few months after Tareen raised the black-magic claims with Khan, top PTI leaders were invited to dinner to celebrate his marriage. "There were 18 men and two women around the table but no sign of Bushra Bibi," Tareen said. Towards the end of the meal someone asked when they would meet Khan's new wife. Khan left the room and returned with Bushra Bibi dressed head to toe in white. Khan introduced her to his guests one by one; eventually they reached Tareen. Up to this point Bushra had been silent. But to Tareen she said: "I am wearing these white clothes so you don't think of me as a black-magic woman."

As he drove away from the dinner with a colleague, Tareen said: "I'm finished." Sensing he had no future in the PTI, he resigned and set up a rival political party. Others took heed. "If you criticise her, you are out of the party. And that's off the record," said a senior PTI figure, shortly after criticising her.

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Tareen was not the only one cast aside after incurring Bushra Bibi's disapproval. Awn Chaudry, Khan's political aide, had worked with him for a long time, and naturally expected to be present at the oath-taking ceremony when he became prime minister. But a few hours before the event, Khan sent him a text, which Chaudry showed to *1843*. "Bushra begum has had a dream last night. She does not tell me what it is but says that she cannot go to the ceremony tomorrow if u are there. Am sorry about this as u have loyally served me for the past 6 years." The next day he was dismissed.

Both Chaudry and Inam Shah, Khan's house manager, said that Khan sought Bushra Bibi's opinion when making decisions on political and government appointments. Accepting his wife's claim that she could read faces, he would ask for photographs of potential candidates, which would be sent to Bushra Bibi for a decision. She also got involved in pettier matters. One of Khan's relatives recalled an occasion when she advised Khan it was not a propitious time to travel: "So for four hours, the plane sat on the tarmac until Bushra Bibi decided it was time to fly."

Pakistan's armed forces are the country's political power-brokers. General Qamar Javed Bajwa (*right*), former chief of the army, reportedly took a dislike to Bushra Bibi

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The relative wasn't alone in being surprised by Bushra Bibi's hold over Khan. Faisal Vawda, who comes from one of Pakistan's richest business families, was an admirer of Khan's patriotism and determination to combat corruption. As a long-time ally, he was made minister of water in Khan's cabinet (he has now shifted his allegiance and makes frequent appearances on Pakistani news channels expressing support for the army). Vawda said he was and still is fond of Khan, but as a minister was frustrated to find that Bushra Bibi seemed to be involved in every discussion. He heard about one meeting between Khan and the then head of the army, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, in which Bushra Bibi "spoke more than either of them".

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The PTI firmly denies these accounts. "I saw some decisions being taken which the media said she took, but I was there," said a former spokesperson for Khan. "She was not involved."

There is a long tradition of attributing the failings of powerful men to their scheming wives—think of Lady Macbeth. For those inclined to this way of thinking, Bushra Bibi fits the mould perfectly: a sorceress bewitching the nation's hero and bending him to her will.

But there is another theory about Bushra Bibi's influence which has less to do with magic. In this version of events, her hold over Khan is the result of Machiavellian string-pulling, orchestrated by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's feared spy agency.

The ISI reaches deep into every aspect of life in Pakistan; eavesdropping, gathering *kompromat*, exploiting relationships with jihadists and politicians alike. Its senior ranks are made up of army officers on secondment, so for the most part it reflects army thinking.

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"Here was a woman who does not come from one of the big political families leading thousands of men to challenge the army. She is breaking new ground"

The first sign the agency was interested in Bushra Bibi came shortly after her secret wedding to Khan. Talat Hussain, a prominent Pakistani journalist, tweeted his scepticism about Khan's assertion that the pair had not yet tied the knot. Soon afterwards the journalist was exercising in his gym when he received a phone call from General Faiz Hameed, then the head of counter-intelligence at the ISI. "This is not nice, you know, talking about Bushra and Imran's marriage," Hussain recalled the general saying. "She's a good match." Surprised that the ISI had an interest in the matter, Hussain asked the general if the ISI was the matchmaker. "He said, 'No, we are not. But we have been watching it for a long time, and there's nothing wrong with it. So please, you know, don't do this.'"

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The ISI may not have arranged the relationship, but there are reasons to think the agency took advantage of it. The organisation has a history of pressing servants and staff in politically important households to become informers. But according to a story circulating in Pakistan, and picked up by the media, Faiz (as he is usually known) used Bushra Bibi to pull off something more subtle and effective. The story goes that the ISI sent one of its officers to convey intelligence to one of Bushra Bibi's *pirs*, who would relay it to her—and she would relay it to Khan.

Because the ISI has an extensive network of informants, as well as the ability to listen in on telephone calls, it often knows what is going to happen in Pakistan before anyone else does. According to the rumours, the officer would, for example, give one of Bushra Bibi's *pirs* advance notice about which politician was about to be arrested. Bushra Bibi would then tell Khan that she had received a revelation about the future. When the event she predicted came to pass, Khan would be amazed at his wife's perspicacity and conclude she did indeed have a direct line to God.

Khan's supporters protested when he was arrested for corruption charges that were seen as politically motivated (*background*). The couple are now both in prison

Many rumours in Pakistan turn out not to be true, and much about this story remains opaque. But a senior Pakistani intelligence officer, speaking off the record, described the broad outlines of the influence operation to *1843*. People close to Khan are convinced it happened. "Faiz was getting the information and he would submit details to Bushra Bibi and she would tell Khan she had spiritual ways of getting this information in a dream. That's how Khan started to get blinded," said Faisal Vawda. It's unclear from these accounts whether Bushra Bibi would have known she was being used in this way—it's quite possible that she didn't. When asked about reports of an ISI influence operation using Bushra Bibi, Hasan, the PTI spokesman, said dismissively: "reminds me of Agatha Christie".

It didn't take long for the generals to lose their enthusiasm for Khan, their patience tested in part by the ubiquity of Bushra Bibi. General Bajwa, the army chief, seems to have found her grating and obstructive. "General Bajwa was always ranting about her, saying she does black magic," said one of Khan's former cabinet ministers. "Bajwa was pissed off because he felt that Khan listened to her more than him."

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Khan also raised eyebrows by sacking the head of the ISI, General Asim Munir, in 2019, just eight months into his tenure. The rumour, widely reported in Pakistani media, was that the general had come to Khan with evidence that Bushra Bibi was corruptly helping her friends. (Khan has strongly denied this, and accused General Munir of pursuing a "vindictive" campaign against his wife after being dismissed.)

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The ISI reaches deep into every aspect of life in Pakistan; eavesdropping, gathering kompromat

The prime minister was losing support at the popular level too, as his campaign pledges went unmet. "We promised 5m houses," said Faisal Vawda. "We cannot do that in 20 years, so how could we do it in five?"

In April 2022 Khan discovered what every Pakistani leader before him already knew: civilian politicians cannot remain in office if the army wants them gone. Believing he still had deep public support, Khan upped the ante by publicly criticising the army after he was forced out of power. In November 2022 he was shot in the leg while giving a speech at a rally. The ousted leader immediately blamed the armed forces and their intelligence agencies, saying he could prove some generals were behind a plot to kill him and demanding to know if they were above the law.

On November 24th 2022 Asim Munir, whom Khan had sacked as director general of the ISI, was appointed head of the army, making him the most powerful person in the country. Khan was arrested in May 2023.

At a stroke, protests erupted. For the first time in Pakistan's history, demonstrators attacked military buildings. Khan, daringly, criticised Munir directly for his arrest, saying that the army chief was "petrified" of being sacked if the PTI came back to power, and accusing him of "dismantling the future of this country to protect himself".

Khan's popularity ratings have remained high ever since his arrest, as became clear during last year's elections, when the army did everything it could to harm his chances. As well as some outright rigging, it forced PTI candidates to stand without the PTI party symbol, a cricket bat, beside their names—something which helped illiterate voters identify them. Despite these manoeuvres, the PTI won 93 seats out of 266. This was not enough to form a government, but it was a remarkable show of strength under the circumstances.

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Undaunted, the army leadership and the new government continued to pursue dozens of legal cases against Khan. Three of these named Bushra Bibi (who, like Khan, has denied all the charges against her). The first concerned their marriage on January 1st 2018. Since Bushra Bibi had divorced Manika on November 14th 2017, the waiting period mandated by Islam between a divorce and a subsequent marriage had not been respected, prosecutors claimed. A series of legal hearings included discussion of Bushra Bibi's menstrual cycle, which disgusted many Pakistanis. The couple were sentenced to seven years each, although they won on appeal.

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Bushra Bibi, wearing white, led protests calling for her husband to be released

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The second trial concerned an allegation that Khan and his wife had diverted tens of millions of dollars from a massive fine imposed on a property developer in order to establish an Islamic university. That case led to a 14-year sentence for Khan and seven years for Bushra Bibi, which they are appealing. The third and most eye-catching case concerned presents from the Saudi crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman: for her, jewellery, for him a diamond-encrusted Graff watch. Gifts received by Pakistani officials are meant to be handed over to the state treasury, after which the recipient can pay half of the value to keep the item. Prosecutors say Khan and his wife failed to hand over the presents, secured unrealistically low valuations for them, paid half that sum and then sold them at a profit. This case is still ongoing.

The prosecution's argument against Bushra Bibi was bolstered by a leaked audio tape, in which she was heard berating her house manager, Inam Shah, for taking pictures of gifts arriving at Khan's house. "Why are photos being taken?" she yelled, before banishing him from the property.

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All these accusations, which are widely seen as politically motivated, have failed to dent Khan's appeal. The crimes he has been charged with barely register in the scale of graft that goes on in Pakistan. Many simply see Khan as trustworthy and for them, no number of court cases can tarnish his image. Even Vawda, Khan's estranged political ally, said that his old boss was "not interested in money", pointing out that he did not seek any financial settlement during his divorce from his first wife, Jemima Goldsmith, a wealthy heiress. As one long-time observer of Pakistani politics puts it, "People just don't believe he is corrupt."

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Khan is, according to a letter he wrote to Pakistan's judicial authorities in September, being held alone in a cell like a "cage"

In November last year the PTI tried to harness his popular support to press the authorities into releasing him. Bushra Bibi, who was not in detention at that time, led a procession of protesters from Peshawar to Islamabad. It was the first time she had taken on such a public role and for a brief moment it looked as though she might even harbour ambitions of succeeding Khan as leader of the party. The images of her—fully veiled and standing high on a truck—raced around social media. "It was a remarkable moment," said Atika Rehman, a Pakistani journalist. "Here was a woman who does not come from one of the big political families leading thousands of men to challenge the army. She is breaking new ground." The protest ended when security forces shot at the crowds, killing at least eight people, according to independent journalists who visited hospitals afterwards. (The military authorities have denied that anyone was killed.) Once the protests had died down, Bushra Bibi was arrested.

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On paper, Khan's prospects are not encouraging. The 74-year-old is, according to a letter he wrote to Pakistan's judicial authorities in September, being held alone in a cell like a "cage", without access to books or newspapers (the government has denied mistreating him). Bushra Bibi is also being denied books, the letter said, and even medical treatment. Field Marshal Munir, as he is now known, is more powerful than ever. He has won plaudits for his successful courtship of President Donald Trump, and this month Pakistan's parliament voted him new powers and lifetime immunity from prosecution. Faiz, the former ISI chief whom many saw as Khan's ally in the security establishment, lost his job, and is now in custody awaiting a court-martial.

But popular discontent at the army's interventions in politics continues to fester, and Khan is still regarded as a "moral sovereign", in the words of one prominent historian. Some of Khan's closest advisers, including his sister, Aleema, are said to be urging him to hold fast and resist doing a deal with the army to secure his release. Bushra Bibi, according to a former member of his cabinet, "is more inclined towards talks with the army".

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For many ordinary Pakistanis, who see Khan as the only person who can save Pakistan from the sclerotic grip of its elites, the stakes could hardly be higher. Khan seems determined not to give in, but he has also spoken about the enduring influence of his wife. "Bushra Bibi has not made herself my weakness," he said in a recent statement from his cell. "Her bravery has made me stronger." ●

Owen Bennett-Jones is a former Islamabad correspondent for the BBC, and the author of two books about Pakistan. **Bushra Taskeen** has worked in Pakistan for the BBC and Reuters

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS: **MICHELLE THOMPSON**
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Expanded & Improved Glossary for the Article

Pakistani Political & Institutional Terms

- **Establishment** – Euphemism for the real power centre in Pakistan: the military high command + ISI (intelligence agency). It decides who rules and who falls.
- **Hybrid regime** – Informal system (2018–2022) where a civilian government (Imran Khan) was in power but the army/ISI controlled key decisions (foreign policy, security, appointments).
- **Deep state** – The unelected, hidden power structure (army + intelligence) that operates behind the scenes.
- **Kompromat** – (Russian loanword) Blackmail or compromising material collected on politicians; the ISI is famous for it.
- **No-confidence vote** – Parliamentary mechanism used in April 2022 to legally remove Imran Khan as prime minister.
- **Container politics** – 2014 sit-in protests led by Imran Khan; protesters lived in shipping containers in Islamabad for months.
- **Dharnas** – Sit-in protests, often religiously charged, used as a political weapon in Pakistan.
- **Rigging allegations** – Common claim that elections are stolen through pre-poll manipulation or fake votes.
- **Caretaker government** – Temporary neutral government that runs the country in the months before elections.

Islamic / Religious / Cultural Terms

- **Iddat / Iddah** – Mandatory waiting period (usually 130 days or three menstrual cycles) for a divorced or widowed Muslim woman before she can remarry. Violation is a criminal offence in Pakistan.
- **Nikah** – Islamic marriage contract.
- **Pir / Pirani** – Sufi spiritual guide or saint (male = pir, female = pirani). Often hereditary and very influential in rural Pakistan.
- **Sufism** – Mystical branch of Islam focused on direct experience of God, love, and spiritual purification.
- **Murid** – Disciple/follower of a pir.
- **Taweez** – Amulet or talisman containing Quranic verses, believed to protect or heal; often accused of being "black magic" by rivals.
- **Jinn** – Supernatural beings in Islamic belief; sometimes blamed for illness or bad events.
- **Shalwar kameez** – Traditional loose tunic and trousers worn in Pakistan.
- **Dupatta** – Long scarf worn with shalwar kameez, often over the head as a modesty veil.
- **Burqa / Niqab** – Full face/body covering (Bushra Bibi wears a loose niqab-style veil in public after marriage to Khan).

Difficult / Uncommon English & Borrowed Words from the Article

- **Playboy** – In the 1980s–90s London scene, Imran Khan's image as a glamorous, womanising cricketer.
- **Low ebb** – A very low point in life or career.
- **Fizzled out** – Gradually failed or came to nothing (used for Khan's early political attempts).
- **Chimed with** – Was in harmony with / resonated with (the public mood).
- **Lofty** – Very ambitious or noble-sounding (promises).
- **Eccentric** – Unusual, slightly strange behaviour.
- **Volte-face** – Sudden and complete reversal of opinion or policy.
- **Vindictive** – Having or showing a strong desire for revenge.
- **Treasonous** – Betraying one's country (cypher case against Khan).
- **Venom** – Intense hatred or malice.
- **Misogyny** – Hatred or prejudice against women (used against Bushra Bibi).
- **Speculation** – Forming theories without firm evidence (endless in Pakistani media).
- **Tittle-tattle** – Idle gossip.
- **Naïvety** – Lack of experience or judgement; innocence.
- **Treachery** – Betrayal of trust.
- **Undercurrents** – Hidden trends or feelings.
- **Hush** – Sudden silence because something is shocking or secret.

Key Names & Nicknames (for quick reference)

- **Imran Khan** – "The cricketer" in the title; also called "Kaptaan" (Captain).
- **Bushra Bibi** – Formerly Bushra Maneka / Pinki Pir; "the mystic" in the title; now usually called "Bushra Bibi" or "Begum" (respectful term for wife).
- **Khawar Farid Maneka** – Bushra's first husband; customs officer from a landed Punjabi family.
- **Reham Khan** – Imran's short-lived second wife (2015), British-Pakistani journalist.
- **Jemima Goldsmith** – Imran's first wife (1995–2004), British heiress and screenwriter.
- **General Asim Munir** – Current army chief; "the spy" in the title (former ISI chief).
- **General Qamar Javed Bajwa** – Previous army chief (2016–2022); initially backed Khan, later turned against him.
- **Nawaz Sharif** – Three-time prime minister; Khan's main rival; disqualified after Panama Papers.

Thank you